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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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"MAY: OLDER AMERICANS MONTH"

For the past 20 years, successive American presidents and congresses have joined in proclaiming May as Older Americans Month. The same proclamation has been issued this year.

Undoubtedly, many senior citizens will be less than thrilled by a proclamation signed by a President who has been so consistently indifferent to their needs.

Many of us in Congress do not appreciate the hypocrisy of those of our colleagues who have voted to reduce senior citizen benefits while, at the same time, supporting a symbolic month of honor.

Older Americans deserve a special month of recognition. However, they also deserve to spend their senior years free of worry about life's basic essentials--medical care, food, clothing, and shelter. Right now millions of senior citizens are deprived in one or more of these areas.

As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, I am especially concerned about medical care for older people. The key federal program for the elderly, Medicare, is becoming worse rather than better. Deductibles and co-payments have both increased. The range of services covered has improved only slightly since the program's inception.

I wonder how many Americans too young to receive Medicare realize that this program now covers only about 35% of the health care costs of seniors. Over and over, I hear from younger people how lucky senior citizens are because "Medicare pays for everything". I could fill the rest of this column enumerating essential health services not covered by Medicare.

We have a national agricultural crisis due to farm surpluses. Yet, at the same time, many senior citizens either lack the funds for, or lack access to, adequate nutrition.

Senior citizens in Los Angeles are in desperate circumstances with respect to housing. Rents are high, many apartment buildings have been converted to costly condominiums, only a tiny number of subsidized housing units have been built in recent years, the private housing industry is building very few units appropriate both in price

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and design for the majority of senior citizens. Many senior citizens are trapped in neighborhoods which have undergone dramatic changes. Poorer senior citizens have been left behind while their churches, synagogues, stores, and neighbors have moved to other areas.

I want to emphasize the direct connection between human dignity and adequate services for the elderly. No number of proclamations can make an older person feel worthwhile if he or she cannot maintain a decent standard of living. No senior citizen can realize his or her potential as a member of the larger community if each day is spent coping with the challenge of survival.

In Jewish tradition, respecting and honoring our elders has been part of Torah law and of our everyday life. Children regarded it as a matter of pride and honor to attend to the needs of their parents and grandparents. Every family, no matter how poor, found room for elderly kin. This applied not only to very close relatives, but also to more distant family members. It was not unusual for an older aunt or uncle to live with a niece or nephew.

In our religious life, the elderly were honored with seats along the Eastern wall and numerous signs of deference. No Yeshiva dean or Talmudic scholar ever retired at 65. They served a grateful community for as long as they were physically able--often to the very end of their lives.

I hope this year's Older Americans Month will be more than a hollow gesture. I hope it will arouse in the President, the Congress, and the public strong new impulses of compassion and concern.

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